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Research mentoring in the Carnegie Faculty of Sport and Education

Pat Broadhead and Phil Jones

This initiative grew from an open meeting in the Carnegie Faculty of Sport and Education (CSE) on the topic of 'research mentoring'. A large group of staff attended and the overall consensus was that it would be helpful to have a scheme in place to support academic staff in developing their profiles of research and scholarly activity. Views were expressed about how the scheme might look and colleagues seemed in agreement that it would be most helpful if the mentor-mentee relationship was both supportive and equal, something akin to the definition that Fletcher (1998) gives:

"Good mentors are critical friends, personal guides, counsellors, engaged in a relationship that can become as fundamental to the personal development of the mentor as to the development of the mentee."

A group of interested colleagues got together and successfully submitted a bid within the TQEF (Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund) to the Pro-Vice-Chancellor's Office: Assessment, Learning and Teaching under the auspices of small grants to develop Research-Informed Teaching. This group grew to eight in size, which seemed an optimum number for a development group and managed to represent all aspects of work across the Faculty in both Education and Sport. Included in our number at this point was Val Tarbitt, a Senior Lecturer in CSE (now retired). Val brought to CSE a professional speciality in mentoring and some well-formed views much in keeping with the above quotation. We also began to explore and consider the extent to which mentoring could bring value to organisations as well as to individuals (Hezlett & Gibson, 2005) and its potential for Leeds Met within the context of the University's research strategy and its clear commitment to expansion of research activity across the University. As Hezlett & Gibson (2005) remark:

"Given current trends in the workplace, such as placing greater responsibility on employees for managing their own careers, increasing need for continuous learning, and greater reliance on on-the-job development, it seems unlikely that mentoring will wane in significance soon."

We developed a format for a series of half-day workshops. We made it clear that the workshops were designed to inform the development of Faculty policy and to help formulate associated guidelines for the initiative. These workshops were to be a continuation of our Faculty conversations about research mentoring but were also designed to spread the word that research mentoring was emerging within the Faculty and to begin momentum towards implementation. Each workshop followed a similar pattern. We began with an introduction that gave a broad definition of research mentoring. The emphasis was on support for staff in their day to day engagement with research and scholarly activity across a wide spectrum of activities; it is distinct from supervision of research students. Colleagues were then moved into an interactive and paired activity which got them examining a wide range of resources (from cubes to plastic figures and felt-tip pens) to encourage them to draw images and write on large sheets of paper about three key issues. These issues were the benefits of research mentoring in the Faculty; the challenges for the Faculty; and kinds of support that might be helpful. A follow-on plenary allowed further discussion of these three themes and notes were taken from the discussions.

This was followed by a brief presentation on the principles and practice of effective mentoring that tied in with many of the comments raised in the plenary, such as the importance of a mentor-mentee relationship that is both reciprocal and negotiated within a structured, supportive framework (Barkham, 2005), that helping colleagues to move forward with their own research agenda is at the forefront and that it should also be very much about confidence-building and the celebration of achievement. We also brought in an outside speaker to look at the importance of moving forward with this agenda within higher education. While research and scholarly activity inform our teaching and are important for this reason, we are working within an increasingly competitive climate in higher education and need to keep up with our colleagues in other higher education institutions in relation to this aspect.

Our final workshop task was to ask colleagues to begin to identify the wide spectrum of activities that might be involved in 'research and scholarly activity'. The list was a long one. It included the use of research in teaching, conference attendance and presentation of papers (seen as potentially distinct activities for new researchers), beginning to write, seeking internal funding for research, seeking external funding, etc. We were, however, in agreement that research mentoring should be available to all staff regardless of where they sit on the developmental continuum.

After the workshops, we began to think about how we would initiate and manage the research mentoring scheme. We negotiated an administrative role to begin to manage a mentor-mentee database – not for accountability purposes but so that we might ensure that those colleagues who felt less confident about this process would not be omitted from it because of uncertainty or timidity. We also recognised that mentors had a right to be protected from overload so it was important to keep track of individual commitments. We resolved to develop a website with key information. We decided to launch the initiative with a short brochure for every academic staff member. The brochure contains the policy and guidelines as evolved through the workshop activities and discussions. We took a draft of the content to a final workshop at the Staff Development Festival and got useful feedback from colleagues who had not attended any of the workshops and for whom the whole initiative was 'brand-new'.

The brochure has now been circulated to all CSE academic colleagues. It identifies the members of the Carnegie Research Mentoring team who are first points of contact for staff, if needed, to facilitate a mentor-mentee pairing and includes our definition of research mentoring. Following on from this, the document identifies seven principles of practice which will underpin the dissemination and implementation of the initiative across the Faculty; these have been developed in conjunction with colleagues in the Faculty. This is followed by suggestions for getting mentors and mentees together which include a mentee's right to approach a colleague and ask if they are available to support them as a mentor. There are some guidelines on conducting research mentoring meetings and we have concluded the document with some frequently asked questions.

This clearly needs to be an ongoing initiative and the Mentoring Team are now moving into support and development mode for mentors and mentees. We believe the initiative will require ongoing development workshops for both mentors and mentees, together and separately. We need to keep the Faculty Leadership Team up to speed so that they can continue to support the initiative as it begins to grow. We are staying in touch with our Teaching and Research groups and group leaders in 'spreading the word'.

A more recent paper by Hezlett & Gibson (2007) makes some very interesting links between mentoring and social capital. Although the respective literatures have been previously independent, the paper begins to explore the connections in relation to creating and sustaining a culture that fosters the development of relationships. Hezlett & Gibson argue a case for ways in which positive relationships, both formal and informal (both of which can be encapsulated in research mentoring) enhance careers alongside organisational development initiatives. They

explore the practice implications of the application of the social capital concept of 'investment' in terms of when and where mentoring might be most effectively utilised – 'trust' and 'connection' are integral to the development of these relationships and social networks and may also be a key feature of organisational attraction and retention.

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